

Darcy POV 12

Darcy was horrified to hear that Bingley had agreed to let Mrs. Bennett come to Netherfield to assess the condition of her daughter. He was even more aghast to hear that she had responded immediately and was expected momentarily. He planned to take a brisk walk about the estate to avoid her.

However, he was thwarted in this desire as the annoying woman and her remaining daughters arrived before the family had hardly finished their breakfast.

Unfortunately, the apothecary had arrived at the same time and advised against moving Miss Bennett. Mrs. Bennett caught on to the opinion fiercely and Miss Bingley, in a moment of weakness, invited her into the parlor.

Darcy cursed his lack of foresight on finding himself in the very room with the offensive woman.

"I hope you have not found your daughter to be worse than you expected," said Bingley with the same deference he might use to the Prince Regent himself.

"Indeed, I have, sir," was Mrs. Bennet's answer in maudlin tones as she fanned herself with a handkerchief. "I'm afraid she is a great deal too ill to be moved. Mr. Jones, the apothecary, says we must not *think* of moving her. Though I hate to impose further on your generous hospitality, we must trespass a little longer on your kindness." This last was said with a smile that could not be hid under pretensions of concern for her daughter.

As Darcy considered the opportunist before him, he recalled that Miss Bennet had been sent to Netherfield on horseback rather than in a carriage, in spite of the threat of rain. Had the odious woman orchestrated the whole sorry situation?

"Removed!" cried Bingley. "It must not be thought of. My sister, I am sure, will not hear of her removal."

Caroline's mouth pinched as her brother aimed to hide his own feelings behind the screen of his sister's implied interest in Miss Bennet's well-being.

"You may depend upon it, madam," said Miss Bingley, with cold civility, that simmered with underlying contempt, "that Miss Bennet shall receive every possible attention while she remains with us."

"Oh, you are too kind! Too kind!" squealed Mrs. Bennet and launched into a story of how she had sung the Bingley family's praises to anyone who would listen.

Darcy sneaked a sidelong glance at Miss Elizabeth, who had come down with her mother to bid her adieu. He was heartened to find her gripping the skirt of her gown with an anxious wrinkling of her pretty brow.

As Mrs. Bennet's insufferably long tale came to an end, she added, "I am sure, if it was not for such good friends, I do not know what would become of her, for she is very ill indeed, and suffers a vast deal, though with the greatest patience in the world, which is always the way with her, for she has, without exception, the sweetest temper I ever met with."

Friends! They were acquaintances at best. She was in grave danger of inserting herself without authority into a society upon which she had no claim.

Before anyone else could get a word in, she continued, "I often tell my other girls they are nothing to her."

Darcy examined Miss Bennet's sisters to see the effect of such overt favoritism. Miss Mary looked down at her hands. Miss Lydia was practically bouncing out of the settee as she gawked around the room and Miss Kitty merely smiled. It was clear the sisters were used to such pronouncements.

He stole another glance at Miss Elizabeth who was biting her bottom lip and was perched so far on the edge of her seat that she was in immediate danger of falling to the floor.

Proving Darcy's theory of Mrs. Bennet's machinations, she left off worrying about her daughter and with no preamble, turned her attentions to the house.

"You have a sweet room here, Mr. Bingley, and a charming prospect over that gravel walk. I do not know a place in the country that is equal to Netherfield. You will not think of quitting it in a hurry, I hope, though you have but a short lease."

This thinly veiled attempt to ferret out his friend's affections made Darcy's blood boil. The lady had not been in the house over half an hour and she was already making wedding plans.

Guileless Bingley, quite unaware of the trap, displayed his spontaneous nature in admitting, "Whatever I do is done in a hurry, and therefore if I should resolve to quit Netherfield, I should probably be off in five minutes." His eyes crept to the ceiling. "At present, however, I consider myself as quite fixed here."

Seeing her mother about to launch into another obsequious monologue, Miss Elizabeth almost tripped over herself to prevent the case by rushing to say, "That is exactly what I should have supposed of you, Mr. Bingley!"

Always ready for fun repartee, Bingley turned to her and cried, "You begin to comprehend me, do you?"

"Oh yes—I understand you perfectly," she retorted, one eye on her mother.

"I wish I might take this for a compliment;" Bingley responded with good humour, "but to be so easily seen through, I am afraid, is pitiful."

"It does not necessarily follow that a deep, intricate character is more or less estimable than such a one as yours."

Darcy winced. Though Miss Elizabeth clearly had not meant the comment as an offense, he felt Miss Bingley stiffen beside him.

Before he could fashion a way to lead Miss Elizabeth out of her current dilemma, her mother cried, "Lizzy! Remember where you are and do not run on in the wild manner that you are suffered at home."

The hypocrisy of the comment was lost on Mrs. Bennet, but the hot patch of red that appeared on Miss Elizabeth's gentle cheek revealed that it was not lost on her.

Bingley rushed to her rescue. "I did not know before that you were a studier of character. It must be an amusing study."

"Yes; but intricate characters are the *most* amusing. They have at least that advantage." She lowered her eyes, but his heart caught as she flashed a sidelong glance his way.

Did this mean she found *him* interesting? Did she consider him an *intricate* character?

He must join the conversation.

"The country can in general supply but few subjects for such a study. In a country neighbourhood you move in a very confined and unvarying society." Had he just insulted her county society? He cursed his inability to extemporise.

"But people themselves alter so much," she responded with some heat in her tone, "that there is something new to be observed in them forever."

"Yes, indeed," cried Mrs. Bennet, her pitch showing that she had been grossly offended by Darcy's manner of mentioning a *country* neighbourhood. "I assure you there is quite as much of *that* going on in the country as in town."

The passion of her response surprised everybody; and Darcy, after looking at her for a moment, turned silently away, worried that if he tried to correct his faux pas, it would just make things worse.

However, his silence seemed to indicate to Mrs. Bennet that she had gained a complete victory over him, and rather than let her comment be the end of the discussion, she continued her triumph.

"I cannot see that London has any great advantage over the country, for my part, except the shops and public places. The country is a vast deal pleasanter, is not it, Mr. Bingley?"

Darcy noticed his friend's eyes darting from sister to sister and over to him before he blurted out, "When I am in the country I never wish to leave it; and when I am in town, it is pretty much the same. They have each their advantages, and I can be equally happy in either."

Ever the peacemaker.

Darcy hoped that might be the end of the prickly discussion.

"Ay, that is because you have the right disposition. But that gentleman," said Mrs. Bennet looking straight at Darcy, "seemed to think the country was nothing at all."

The perceived offense had struck her more deeply than Darcy had imagined and she could not let it go. How was he to get out of this situation without prostrating himself at the feet of this woman, a situation he refused to contemplate?

To his surprise Miss Bennet came to his rescue.

"Indeed, mamma, you are mistaken," she said, blushing for her mother. "You quite mistook Mr. Darcy. He only meant that there was not such a variety of people to be met with in the country as in town, which you must acknowledge to be true."

Her comment succeeded in taking the wind out of Mrs. Bennet's sails. "Certainly, my dear, nobody said there were; but as to not meeting with many people in this neighbourhood, I believe there are few neighbourhoods larger. I know we dine with four-and-twenty families."

The appearance of a court jester could not have had a greater effect on the company. Mrs. Hurst failed in her efforts to cover a snort and resorted to faking a slight cough as she shared a silent look of victory with her sister. Meanwhile, Mrs. Bennet looked around for confirmation, oblivious of the ridiculousness of her confession, as Miss Elizabeth's countenance fell. The humor of her mother's comment robbed Darcy of the ability to say anything sensible to redeem the situation.

Darcy knew that Bingley had also recognized the comedy of her statement, and that nothing but concern for Elizabeth could enable him to keep his countenance. Miss Bingley was less delicate and directed her eye towards Mr. Darcy with a very expressive smile.

Was there any way to save this disaster?